

Congressman gets results

Critics say he gains headlines with brash tactics, ignores other legislators' pursuit of the same goals

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For more than half a century, politicians around Buffalo moaned, groaned and griped about tolls on the Niagara Thruway.

But when Rep. Brian Higgins last month threatened to withhold federal money from the state Thruway Authority, the debate suddenly became serious. Two gubernatorial candidates even promised to wipe out the Black Rock and Ogden Street toll barriers if

elected next year.

That wasn't all. The freshman Democrat from South Buffalo raised a furor when the New York Power Authority offered Buffalo a minuscule relicensing settlement. He then helped bring home a \$279 million deal — three times the original offer.

And while waterfront development advocates complained for years about the Skyway, it was Higgins' voice that finally prompted state transportation officials at least to listen.

There's no question that the rookie

Congressman with blue-collar roots and a Harvard education gets results.

So why does Higgins feud with his Western New York colleagues in Congress?

Why do some mock him as "the best state legislator" in Washington?

And why would an audience of local liberals boo him on a national radio program?

It's a result of what he calls his impatience with the status quo.

"That wasn't the plan," Higgins said, "but it's the consequence of talking on the tough issues."

Higgins has so solidly crafted his new role that the Republican Party is

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File photo

Despite being a freshman congressman, Rep. Brian Higgins has not been shy about rocking the boat.

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He rejects 'whatever you do, nothing changes' mentality

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struggling to find an opponent for him this year — even though he won by only 2,800 votes two years ago over former County Commissioner Harry A. Naples.

But it doesn't mean he is sailing through his first term without critics. They say his methods so often focus on established politicians that threats and recriminations were inevitable.

He has openly feuded with Rep. Lou Latta, the Democrat from a Rochester suburb who shares representation of Buffalo with Higgins. Many say she played an equally important role in the development agreement but Higgins got nearly all the credit. She would not comment for this story.

Higgins shares of the critics and says he goes along with "like-minded people who are concerned about this community." It's polite to hit with Anthony H. Gioia, a major Republican figure who is now chairman of the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp., at the same past-salutary-to-cooperation.

While I was asking the governor on releasing the Power Authority, Tony Gioia was using his influence without

compromising the politics," Higgins said. "The point is — the combination of those two factors meant results."

Gioia returns the compliment, emphasizing the Power Authority agreement would have never happened without Higgins.

"The loudest and stridentest, and my experience with him has been nothing but positive," Gioia said. "And this is someone who should have been applauded of me because I was always backing the other guy."

Gioia's comments indicate how Higgins has determined with whom he works and with whom he won't — or can't.

"I have outstanding relationships with Sen. [Charles] Schumer and Sen. [Jill] Clinton," Higgins said. "I never had that with [Rep.] Tom Reynolds but I understand that because his job is to take me out. Louis Stangor — I just don't know how that went."

But Higgins' critics insist he is going head-on with such tactics, while ignoring other legislators' pursuit of the same goals. They call him "Washington's best state legislator," and claim his bluntness promises results that he can't achieve as a freshman member of the minority.

"When you look at models of how Reynolds, Stangor, Schumer and Clinton worked together to save the Niagara Falls Air Race, you see it worked," said one senior Democratic aide who was referring to the state congressional delegation and asked not to be identified. "He just goes for bombable and cheap victories instead of doing the work."

The same aide, however, notes for Higgins as someone who can make an impact on the state's Washington's best state legislator, "an unusual ability to alienate everybody around him."

"He's tough and he's a fighter and that's great," the source said. "He's got a lot of potential but he needs to grow up." One Albany democrat said Higgins' team never introduced legislation that would have the state pay for the construction of a new bridge over the Niagara River, but instead forced the state to pay for the bridge.

"The thing the public's consciousness on these things that where are we going to find \$100 million to do that? The city said, 'No.'"

Higgins may be too impatient to play by conventional rules. He says Buffalo politicians accomplished little that way, while he forced progress on big issues like the waterfront and hydro-power.

Most of all he rejects the "learned helplessness" he says illustrates a "whatever you do, nothing changes" mentality.

"That apathy describes a community that has lost confidence, retreated into itself, and pointed fingers," he said. So far, Higgins' approach is to focus on central issues like the waterfront and the power authority relicensing.

And the key has been legislation, whether threatened or real. When the Power Authority ignored his plea for a richer settlement to finance waterfront projects, he filed specific legislation. He threatened the same for the Thruway.

And when the Buffalo Bills hinted at moving because the National Football League's new collective bargaining agreement hurt teams in smaller cities, he presented a bill making the NFL vulnerable to anti-trust action.

There are conventional means to achieve something that unconventional means, he said. But no, legislation has been the best to achieve settlement.

Higgins tactics have worked, according to Buffalo Niagara Partnership President Andrew J. Schuchman, because he has adopted a "yes/no-specific approach" that is not ideological. They're not "Y" or "N" or "S."

Still, Higgins has not connected everyone. When Al Franken brought his national radio show to Buffalo on April 20 and invited the congressman as a guest, the interesting audience looked Higgins No doubt his stance on the Factor Act and the war in Iraq were at the root.

Higgins supports the Patriot Act, and though he does not see how the war has been conducted, fears that a U.S. withdrawal now would cause a civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Others like former Assembly Majority Leader Michael J. Bragman of Cheektowatch, who has long respected Higgins' when Bragman staged an unsuccessful congressional Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver in 2003, Higgins struck with him when the effort collapsed. Others ran for over.

"He was a younger member who had as much to lose as anyone in the process, yet was willing to stand up and do what he thought was right," Bragman said.

Bragman said he thought then and believes now that Higgins will succeed because he has the ability to understand what is important, and has intellect and courage.

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